



A FEMINIST
COMPANION TO
SHAKESPEARE

EDITED BY **DYMPNA CALLAGHAN**



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 **BLACKWELL**
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A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare



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Contributors

Denise Albanese is Associate Professor of English and Cultural Studies at George Mason University. She is author of *New Science, New World* (Duke University Press, 1996), and has published on Francis Bacon, historicity and the early modern period, and recent Shakespeare films as global commodities. She is currently working on early modern mathematics instruction, and on Kenneth Branagh, Anglophilia, and the Americanization of Shakespeare.

Philippa Berry is Fellow and Director of Studies in English at King's College, Cambridge. She is the author of *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (Routledge, 1989) and of *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (Routledge, 1999), and co-editor of *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (with Andrew Wernick, Routledge, 1993) and *The Texture of Renaissance Knowledge* (with Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, forthcoming).

Dympna Callaghan is William P. Tolley Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Syracuse University. Her latest books are *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (Routledge, 1999) and an edited collection, *The Duchess of Malfi Casebook* (Macmillan, 2000). Earlier books include *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (Harvester, 1989), the co-authored volume, *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics* (Blackwell, 1994), and the co-edited *Feminist in Early Modern Culture* (Cambridge, 1995).

Juliet Dusinberre is the author of the pioneering work in feminist criticism, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (Macmillan, 1975, 1996). She has written two books on Virginia Woolf: *Alice to the Lighthouse* (Macmillan, 1987, 1999) and *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance* (Macmillan, 1997), and is currently editing *As You Like It* for Arden 3. She is M.C. Bradbrook Fellow in English at Girton College, Cambridge.

Juliet Fleming is a University Lecturer in the Faculty of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Trinity Hall. She is writing a book on writing practices in early modern England, which will be published by Reaktion Press.

Margo Hendricks is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She is the co-editor of *Women, Race, and Writing in the Early Modern Period*. Her current projects are *Forms of Passing: Race and Genres in the Making of Aphra Behn*; *Shaping Fantasies: William Shakespeare's Concept of Race*; and *The Philology of Race*.

Theodora A. Jankowski is the author of *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* (University of Illinois Press, 1992) and *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). She is also the author of a number of articles on Shakespeare, John Lyly, John Webster, and Thomas Heywood. She is currently involved in a project which argues for the use of "class" as a legitimate modality of analysis within early modern English literary texts and also explores the development, in Thomas Heywood's plays, of a "middle-class" identity that is clearly set in contrast to gentry identity.

M. Lindsay Kaplan is an Associate Professor of English at Georgetown University. She authored *The Culture of Slander in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and co-edited, with Valerie Traub and Dymphna Callaghan, *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). She is editing *The Merchant of Venice* for Bedford/St. Martin's and writing a book on the intersections of gender and Judaism in early modern England.

Ania Loomba is Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (1989) and *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998), and co-editor (with Martin Orkin) of *Postcolonial Shakespeares* (1998). She is currently writing a book on Shakespeare and race, and researching early modern English representations of the East Indies.

Joyce Green MacDonald is Associate Professor of English at the University of Kentucky, where she teaches courses in Shakespeare and Renaissance non-dramatic literature. The author of several articles on women, race, and gender in early modern drama, she has also edited Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko* for the forthcoming *Broadview Anthology of Restoration Drama*.

Laurie E. Maguire is University Lecturer and Tutorial Fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford. She is the author of *Shakespearean Suspect Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), co-editor of *Textual Formations and Reformations* (University of Delaware Press, 1998), and has written many articles on feminist, textual, and theatrical issues.

Carol Thomas Neely, Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is co-editor of *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*; author of *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*; and has written articles on Shakespeare, sonnet sequences, feminist theory, and, recently, on Margaret Cavendish's feminist utopia. Her essay in this collection is from chapter 4 of her book manuscript, *Distracted Subjects: Madness, Gender, and Confinement in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*.

Phyllis Rackin, Professor of English in General Honors at the University of Pennsylvania, is a past president of the Shakespeare Association of America. Her books include *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* and (with Jean E. Howard) *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories*. "Misogyny is Everywhere" comes from her current project, a revisionist study of the roles of women in Shakespeare's world and in his plays.

Katherine M. Romack is a doctoral candidate in English at Syracuse University specializing in women's cultural pursuits in seventeenth-century England. Her dissertation explores women's changing relationship to representation between the outbreak of Civil War and the Restoration of the monarchy, and she is currently compiling an anthology of mid-century works by Englishwomen.

Rachana Sachdev is an Assistant Professor of English at Susquehanna University. She continues to work on medical and travel literature from the early modern era, and is currently completing a book entitled *Exotic Private Parts: Literature and Cultural Gynecology in Early Modern England*.

Jyotsna G. Singh is an Associate Professor of English at Michigan State University. She is the author of *Colonial Narratives, Cultural Dialogues: "Discoveries" of India in the Language of Colonialism* (Routledge, 1996) and the co-author of *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics* (Blackwell, 1994). She is currently co-editing (with Ivo Kamps) *Travel Knowledge: European "Discoveries" in the Early Modern Period* (St. Martin's Press, forthcoming).

Molly Smith teaches at the University of Aberdeen. She is the author of *The Darker World Within: Evil in the Tragedies of Shakespeare and his Successors* (1991) and *Breaking Boundaries: Politics and Play in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (1998). She is currently completing a book, tentatively titled *Shifting Centers and Expanding Margins: Literature and Culture in Early Modern England*.

Kay Stanton, Shakespeare specialist and Professor of English at California State University, Fullerton, has published sixteen articles, including work on Marlowe, Milton, and Arthur Miller, as well as on Shakespeare. In the course of presenting over sixty professional conference papers, she has spoken in six countries and eighteen American states. She is currently completing her book, *Shakespeare's "Whores": Spirited Erotics, Politics, and Poetics*.

Mihoko Suzuki is Associate Professor of English at the University of Miami. She is the author of *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (1989) and editor of *Critical Essays on Edmund Spenser* (1995). She has published articles on Shakespeare, Spenser, Nashe, and Deloney, and on early modern women writers such as Marguerite de Navarre, Margaret Cavendish, and Mary Carleton. She recently completed a book on gender and the national popular and literary form in seventeenth-century England.

Susan Zimmerman is Associate Professor of English at Queens College, City University of New York, and Book Review Editor for *Shakespeare Studies*. She is editor of *Urban Life in the Renaissance* (1985), *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage* (1992), and *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (1999). She is currently working on a book which examines representations of the corpse on the Jacobean stage.

Introduction

Dympna Callaghan

To read . . . texts against themselves is to concede that the performativity of the text is not under sovereign control. On the contrary, if the text acts once, it can act again, and possibly against its prior act. This raises the possibility of resignification as an alternative reading of performativity and of politics.

Butler (1997: 69)

In my more distrustful moments, I sometimes feel that feminist Shakespeareans are a persecuted minority, vulnerable to attack from all sides. More reactionary non- (if not anti-)feminists claim that feminism has “gone too far” and is only outlandishly brought into juxtaposition with the venerable activities of Shakespearean scholarship. Rather than dismissing concerns about gender and sexuality (as “pelvic studies” in one particularly retrograde instance I came across recently), a more progressive school of thought claims that these issues are already assimilated into the mainstream of a post-feminist, post-gender world. Nor is there much comfort to be had within the feminist community, where there is an insistent critique of abstruse intellectualism in general, and the energy spent on elite literary culture in particular. For feminists in other spheres of life and academic discipline often regard Shakespeare as at worst irrelevant and at best marginal to the core of its concern: the status of women.

Feminist Shakespeareans must tackle the onslaught, then, from both outside the perimeters of feminist concern and, more significantly, within them. For if the essentialist view of identity has been dispatched in terms of gender, race, class, and a host of other categories, so that we no longer consider, for example, people to be wholly or primarily defined by their biology, skin color, or socio-economic status, it remains in relation to the feminist Shakespeare scholar. Under the mantle of this identity, it is unfairly assumed that one reads Shakespeare but none of his contemporaries, no early modern women writers, no non-canonical writers. Allegedly insulated in the bowels of the library from the toils and troubles of life in general, at the start of the millennium feminist Shakespeareans are even thought, however

unwittingly, to contribute and compound social ills by failing to engage in practical politics.

I will admit that such perceptions, though not wholly unwarranted, may unreasonably amplify the dilemmas facing people of a feminist persuasion who study Shakespeare. I must further concede – however reluctantly – that such criticism, paradoxically, is itself an integral part of feminist Shakespeare scholarship. For questions about both scholarly and political relevance are of course also questions that feminist Shakespeareans ask themselves all the time because we necessarily also belong to broader intellectual and political communities, whose critiques not only pressure but also shape feminist studies of Shakespeare. Even, or perhaps especially, blunt, uncomfortable questions like “What’s the point?” – often posed not by “experts,” but by students, those most vigorous representatives of a feminist future – have an invaluable place here. A scholarly example of this phenomenon is to be found in a recent commentary by feminist cultural historian Margaret King, who argues against canonicity in all its forms, and whose argument has crucial implications for the study of Shakespeare as literature’s most venerated and studied canonical object:

The scholar must turn away from the grand monuments: the palaces, cathedrals, fortifications, and most of the painted and sculpted works of art. To understand women, it is necessary to look at the objects most associated with them, above all, spun, woven, sewn, embroidered by female hands; their boxes, books, and toys; the beds, chairs, stools and buckets associated with cooking, laundering, and giving birth; the rooms in which they sat to spin, sew, weave, embroider, cook, and talk. (King 1997: 22)

For if the object of feminist inquiry is “women” of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, then Shakespeare, undoubtedly the grand monument of literary studies, would seem to offer only a very oblique bearing on the subject. While, indeed, there must be something to be gleaned about women’s diurnal domestic activities in Shakespeare’s plays, these are heavily mediated by male representation and the constraints of literary convention.

Of course, the importance of juxtaposing canonical information with all kinds of new knowledge about women in Shakespeare’s time cannot be underestimated. However, feminist Shakespeareans are also interested in how the plays may reflect real women as well as how they help produce and reproduce ideas about women that then shape, perpetuate, or even disturb prevailing conditions of femininity. For “woman” is never an already accomplished, cold, hard, self-evident fact or category, but always a malleable cultural idea as well as a lived reality that, to use a Derridean formulation, *always already has a history*. An example framed within the theoretical terms of Judith Butler’s important book, *Excitable Speech*, may make this clearer. In misogynist diatribe, for instance, the word “whore” (examined in detail by one of the contributors to this volume, Kay Stanton) does not secure its injurious effect because women are powerless victims who wilt at its very utterance. Rather, the word is injurious because in the long history of its usage it has become freighted with systemic

patriarchal violence. (Notably, this remains true whether enunciated by males or females – women regularly slandered and defamed one another in early modern England – because women, no less than men, inhabit and implement the social and conceptual structures of the patriarchal order.) A staggering, old man who drinks to allay the poverty and misery of his life and calls a woman a “whore” before he passes out cold on the stone floor of a tavern is not a powerful representative of patriarchy, but his words nonetheless may have the power to wound. “Whore” is probably the worst name you can call a woman in Shakespeare’s England and its capacity to “wound” means not only the power to hurt someone’s feelings but potentially also to deprive women (who might be disowned by their kin as the result of allegations of unchastity) of all means of social and economic support. This word has accrued patriarchal power and its attendant material effects by means of its insistent reiteration in the culture. That is, there is no such thing as an isolated instance of the denigration of women – were it isolated, it would be devoid of cultural power. However the way that history is always inextricably woven into the materiality of discourse applies not just to particular words relating to women, but to the entire edifice of gender organization itself. Thus, femininity is continually produced and reproduced in ways that may subvert conventional understandings or, more commonly, in ways that may further subjugate women, and the operation of this reiteration has to be carefully unraveled and examined in any given historical and/or discursive instance. If language in general is crucial to any understanding of gender organization, then canonical representations of women – that is preeminent cultural re-presentations, reiterations, self-conscious reenactments and rearticulations of the condition of femininity – hold a hugely important place. However, they do so only in relation to all manner of non-canonical knowledges and texts. That is, we can only tell what Shakespeare means about gender, sexuality, race, or social relations by reading his texts in the context of the culture in which he wrote them.

What answers there are, then, to the critiques of feminist Shakespeare studies it must be emphasized are historically complex and intellectually demanding. Indeed, this volume aims to push ahead with uncomfortable questions rather than to offer reassuring answers. For only by doing so can feminism thrive both in its intellectual agenda and as a vibrant social politics. Crucially, all work that conceives itself as feminist necessarily situates itself within a wider political purpose. That purpose, however, is not necessarily, of course, a practical or pragmatic one. Thus, none of the contributors to this volume believes that her essay will diminish patriarchal violence, the number of women on the welfare rolls, or demolish the ubiquitous glass ceiling. Of course, attention to Shakespeare does not prohibit feminist scholars from vigorous participation in the social issues so central to the feminist agenda, and, more to the point, it does not magically extricate Shakespearean feminists from the world of gender trouble, or more specifically, the institutional issues which daily concern feminist educators and students. The point is that no single feminist intervention is an isolated act. Contributors to this volume are part of an ever-growing body of scholarship that has set out to discover what the world, and in this instance, quite specifically what a

hugely influential body of canonical literature, might look like from the perspective of women, from the margins of hitherto patriarchal knowledge.

While the objection to feminist pragmatism can be fairly readily dispatched, perhaps a more difficult critique of the intellectual project of feminist Shakespeare scholarship is one I have only touched on so far, namely, that it further marginalizes already neglected non-canonical women writers. Feminist Shakespeareans no longer consider themselves as purely literary scholars but as cultural historians who are especially interested in women's own representations of themselves, which range from poetry to embroidery. Indeed, the interest in women's writing in particular has been a vital part of redrawing the map of Renaissance literature in general. As Maureen Quilligan points out in making the case for reading non-canonical women writers in relation to canonical men, the effect is not merely "sticking a heretofore unnoticed feature onto the map but by seeing how that new feature changes the relationship among all other features" (Quilligan 1997: 42).

The kind of intervention feminist Shakespeare scholarship understands itself to be making is gestured to in another context by Judith Butler in the epigraph to this introduction. What is at stake for Butler is how to do things differently, how to understand differently. Interestingly, what she says is something Shakespeare scholars have known all along, namely, that performance altered Shakespeare's playtexts and continues to do so – that is, that changes in understanding and interpretation of the variety that feminist scholarship seeks to effect are already written into the cultural transactions of theater.

Other forms of reiteration have, however, also proved necessary: feminists have had to repeat themselves in order to be understood. But now, at least in the realms of Renaissance literary criticism, feminism is so much a part of the common currency of the discourse, that, as Carol Neely pointed out at the 1997 meeting of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, feminism barely needs announce itself. Thus, feminist Shakespeare is caught in the position of being, depending on how you look at it, completely integrated or completely invisible. On the one hand, it is in an important sense a measure of the work done by feminist Shakespeareans over the last twenty years that our project is likely, as we have noted, to be subject to far more rigorous scrutiny and interrogation from within the feminist ranks than outside them. No class or conference worth its salt, after all, fails to include some reference to the gender hierarchy which so fundamentally informs the culture of Shakespeare's England. On the other hand, the questionable progress of feminism may be measured by Stephen Orgel's infamous declaration that "Everyone in this [Renaissance] culture was in some respects a woman" (Orgel 1996: 124). Orgel writes from the position of an anti-essentialism so radical that it is impossible to posit the real historical existence of women, let alone women's oppression. He argues, in other words, that back then everybody – male and female – was victimized anyway. However, the difference between men being subordinate within the social hierarchy, to which Orgel alludes, and the position of women is not just a relative but rather an absolute distinction. This distinction is, in fact, foundational to the feminist enterprise and constitutive of

the very core of feminist politics, which concerns itself with the historical, structural, and systemic facts of women's subjugation. (There was, for instance, no notion in the period of releasing women from traditional social roles.) Even where the oppression of women overlaps with certain other instances of difference – such as race and class – it is never wholly coincident with them. Furthermore, despite backlash rumors to the contrary, feminism has no investment in identifying the complex subjugation of women in patriarchy with mere victimization. Nor can the position of women be reduced to or elided with all other forms of social hierarchy. In short, feminism, while in some sense more prominent than ever, has not quite escaped the danger of being swept under the carpet, and has certainly not escaped the necessity of repeating itself in order to be properly understood.

The aim of this volume is to demonstrate feminist visibility – even to the point of conspicuousness – *and* its integration into the broader field of Shakespeare studies via a series of overlapping categories: the history of feminist Shakespeare criticism, text and language, social economies, sexuality, race, and religion. Beginning with an account of the origins of feminist readings of Shakespeare and their contribution to the political project of feminism, the essays included here cover historical and theoretical contexts and perspectives as well as readings of Shakespeare's texts within a feminist problematic. In particular, the essays in this volume demonstrate that feminism, because it commands a view from the margins, is especially well placed to access the eccentric categories of Renaissance knowledge – those aspects of thought in the period ranging from female circumcision to early modern ideas about the blood – that sit uneasily with our own but are nonetheless central to the period's core concerns – in these instances, religion and national identity.

Feminism is about creating the future differently by looking at history differently. And, of course, we cannot tell what the future, what that world beyond patriarchy might be. Here our project might be seen to parallel that of our Renaissance humanist forbears who ushered in the era of modernity only by looking back and examining afresh a world long past.

The volume begins with two essays that address the origins of Shakespeare criticism. **Juliet Fleming** historicizes the project of Shakespearean feminism or feminist Shakespeare by addressing its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century precursor, "The Ladies' Shakespeare." The concept of such an enterprise was proposed, tongue in cheek, by J. M. Barrie in a speech to the Stationer's Company. Fleming explores the need of all Shakespearians – male, female, feminist, and otherwise – "to identify Shakespeare's interests with our own." Fleming takes the parodic proposition of the Ladies' Shakespeare to its logical conclusion. She looks also at those notoriously eccentric projects of editing and interpretation (a high proportion of them, notably, undertaken by women) in order to show that, like Freud's patients, far from being so aberrant that they are irredeemably distinct and separated from the norm, rather they are but exaggerated versions of it. Thus, Henrietta Bowdler, for example, in purging Shakespeare of "indelicacy," merely enacted with a self-consciously ideological clarity nowhere available until the Oxford Shakespeare the standard principles of textual

editing. Delia Bacon too, whose intellectual labor seems at first far beyond the margins of sanity, believed that Shakespeare was written by a consortium of playwrights of the Baconian persuasion. Textual studies now demonstrates, of course, that she may have been right – or at least less off the mark than those critics who support the model that Shakespeare's plays were a product of his isolated genius.

Katherine M. Romack, in "Margaret Cavendish, Shakespeare Critic," argues that though the Duchess of Newcastle may have been the first Shakespeare critic, she was far from being the feminist late twentieth-century scholars have sought to make her. In fact, Cavendish's retrograde political views are deeply enmeshed in her cultural theory, which argues that women can only exercise their rational capacities under the strict supervision of their husbands. Furthermore, she asserts, they have no business in the commonwealth. It is odd, then, that she regards Shakespeare as a writer able to metamorphose himself into a woman. However, as Romack explains, feminizing Shakespeare is vital to Cavendish's attempt to depoliticize the realm of letters. The latter project is particularly charged in a period in which women are beginning to assert not only their rights to cultural representation but also to political representation. Cavendish is careful to distance herself from the women who petitioned Parliament in this period. While the standard critical line on Cavendish is the contradictory and complex nature of her thought, Romack's placement of it in its historical context of other women's arguments for representation serves to lay bare the reactionary ideological thrust of her views in ways that not only place Cavendish beyond the confines of protofeminism, but place her vividly in the anti-feminist camp. There were, however, many radical women who were active in this period, and Romack asserts it is no accident that their political representation became possible in the period during which neither Shakespeare, the boy actress, nor the woman actress were anywhere on the scene.

Phyllis Rackin, in "Misogyny is Everywhere," asks about critics' own investments in their readings of Shakespeare. She interrogates the standard feminist assumption that in early modern culture men were anxious in the face of female power and that women were invariably disempowered, and that misogyny was rampant and pervasive. Rather, Rackin suggests, reports of women's victimization in an unrelentingly misogynist culture are everywhere not so much in Shakespeare's England as in late twentieth-century cultural criticism: "Reminders that women were expected to be chaste, silent, and obedient probably occur more frequently in recent scholarship than they did in the literature of Shakespeare's time." Why, she asks, are critics so deeply invested in this view of history, and who benefits from the investment? Rackin argues that "The problem is that the conceptual categories that shape contemporary scholarly discourse, no less than the historical records of the past, are often man-made and shaped by men's anxieties, desires, and interests. As such, they constitute instruments of women's exclusion, and often women's oppression." Interest in gender is now, at least in the American academy, an accepted conceptual tool which has become detached from feminism's earlier and explicitly political agenda.

Like Juliet Fleming's opening essay, Laurie E. Maguire argues that the processes of textual and therefore ideological selection have always been with us. Maguire adds, so has feminism, though neither feminism nor textual editing were formalized until the early years of the twentieth century. While Christabel Pankhurst was being imprisoned for suffragist activities in Manchester, W. W. Greg and R. B. McKerrow were founding the Malone Society. Though these contemporaneous movements appeared completely alien to one another at the start of the century, there is now an emergent phenomenon which promises to merge their disparate agendas. That phenomenon is feminist editing, and Maguire goes on to develop its practical and epistemological implications in relation to the infamous textual crux in *As You Like It* on the pairing of Rosalind and Orlando, which troublingly (for many editors at least) implies a male marriage: "That thou mightst ioyn his hand with his." However, as Maguire points out, textual cruces are not the only, or even the primary, space in which feminism can insert itself in the grand and hitherto wholly white male enterprise of textual studies. A feminist editor must confront head-on the way that Renaissance texts abound in the politically incorrect and, in doing so, confront the history that has made feminist politics necessary in the present.

Kay Stanton's "Made to write 'whore' upon" begins by exploring the sometimes startling results of feminist pedagogy in the Shakespeare classroom, and, like Maguire, argues that historicizing Shakespeare's words (and thus our own) is a fundamental political act of empowerment. "Whore," she argues, that word by which Desdemona is so tragically defamed, is unique in the lexicon of debasement. For whereas homophobic slurs and racist epithets have been reappropriated by the groups they were used to denigrate, feminism has been unable to rehabilitate the stubborn misogynist insistence inherent in the word "whore." Further, while "callet," "drab," "stale," "strumpet," "harlot," and "minion" have fallen out of everyday usage, "whore" has had an appalling longevity. Because, rather remarkably, neither the sonnets nor Shakespeare's long poems use the word at all, Stanton argues that we should be cautious about asserting that the word's usage provides evidence that Shakespeare is "the patriarchal bard." In marked contrast to the poems, in *Troilus and Cressida* Thersites uses the word ten times, and the play with the most usages is *Othello*, in which, Stanton argues, Othello commits the "verbal rape" of Desdemona. Furthermore, as readers and audiences we are complicit in this violation if we continue to believe that Desdemona is not a whore because Bianca really is one: "[W]e continue to give cultural sanction to the abusive use of the term for women of any status who are not professional sex workers, like Doll Tearsheet, who owns the term by applying it to herself."

Margo Hendricks, in "'A word, sweet Lucrece': Confession, Feminism, and *The Rape of Lucrece*," takes up Lucrece as a rape-suicide text that seems inherently problematic for, and perhaps even actively resistant to, feminist readings. The problem Hendricks extrapolates is one that extends far beyond the historical and textual limits of Shakespeare's poem, namely that female agency may manifest itself in ways that do not accord with feminist prescriptions. In order to unravel these issues in fresh though

still feminist ways, Hendricks approaches the play via the discourses of the confessional (newly troubled by the Reformation) as a primary way of constructing subjectivity and the issue of race, both as lineage and of ethnicity. Far from being two discrete concerns, however, race and confession are linked as features of the narrative representation of Lucrece's psychologically complex subjectivity, which "highlight the relationship between speech and a gendered notion of 'self' as part of the process of identity-making." Rape engenders Lucrece's lengthy pre-suicide confession, much of which is concerned with evading the consequences of her violation understood as Tarquin's pollution of Collatine's "stock."

Mihoko Suzuki's "Gender, Class, and the Ideology of Comic Form: *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night*" claims that even Elizabeth I felt the couplings at the end of Shakespeare's comedies were a reproach to her own unmarried state. This, Suzuki argues, is an indication of the degree to which people in early modern England possessed a consciousness of the social politics of drama. Suzuki claims that contemporary anxiety about social mobility and unrest – changes for which the culture had inherited no ready-made conceptual or rhetorical framework – is articulated as anxiety about the behavior of women. There is in this period a historically new and explosive convergence between anxieties about gender and anxieties about class. In her exploration of these social tensions, Suzuki juxtaposes instances from Shakespearean comedy with two domestic tragedies, *Arden of Feversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women*. While the latter explicitly connect transgressive femininity with issues of social mobility, the former represses "anxieties about unruly women to displace them onto male scapegoats," a phenomenon which points to the nature of the cultural work Shakespearean comedy performs. Ironically, as Suzuki points out, we always assume, largely because it is so profoundly punitive, that tragedy is the expression of the reality principle that enacts a male fantasy of assigning to women the blame for social disorder. In fact, comic denouement foregrounds its displacement of the problematics of gender and class as its plots unravel the tropes of cross-dressing and cross-class marriage.

Jyotsna G. Singh offers a feminist reading of *The Merchant of Venice*. Singh's feminism is particularly attuned to the economic system which underlies the early modern gender hierarchy and which she addresses via an analysis of the cultural practices of gift exchange as they appear in the play. The gift marks the cusp both between the strictly economic and the socio-cultural mechanism of communication and reciprocity as well as between symbolic exchange in a feudal/agrarian economy and the libidinally charged exchange of commodities characteristic of emerging capitalism. While such exchanges are clearly evident in the play's traffic in women, far from being a romantic version of the circulations of global trade, romantic alliances are complicated by their inextricable implication in the bloody transaction of Shylock's bond. This, Singh argues, is the play's ingenious demystification of economic violence as literal rather than symbolic. Obligations are variously discharged in the play as gifts and commodities in a way that anticipates the ideological occlusions capitalism needs to obscure the coercion inherent in its transactions.

Ania Loomba's "The Great Indian Vanishing Trick – Colonialism, Property, and the Family in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" examines the play's ideological investments in the discourses of travel, trade, and colonialism even though it was produced five years before the setting up of the East India Company in 1600. Loomba addresses the way criticism has habitually segregated gender issues from questions of race and colonialism, and like Joyce MacDonald, suggests ways in which the ostensible focus on discourses about gender and the family can actually work to amplify their historic interrelation with matters of race and exoticism. Loomba reads the dynamics of Titania and Oberon's tussle over the Indian boy in terms of a contest about colonial goods set in the context of familial strife. She argues that there is an important sense in which "India" – as both place and concept – might have contributed to the emergence of the normative ideals of companionate marriage and the nuclear family. The Amazon, for example, is not only a figure of potentially or formerly unruly femininity within the play, but simultaneously a category of the exotic, of racial difference, and of colonial conquest. Like Rachana Sachdev in a later essay, Loomba analyzes the envy with which English travelers comment on barbaric practices used by alien peoples to discipline women. Drowning as a punishment for adultery and the immolation of widows are remarked upon with frank admiration by English commentators. All women, these writers charge, are like those foreign women who will in their wantonness even abuse a cucumber if it is not given to them sliced and drug their husbands so that they can cavort at their leisure. This is, of course, the reverse of the situation in *Dream* where Oberon has his wife drugged. The nuclear family of Western culture, Loomba argues, "was established by othering, but also appropriating and transforming *both* the dynastic marriages and family structures of a feudal past, and the domestic institutions of the non-Western world."

Joyce Green MacDonald's "Black Ram, White Ewe: Shakespeare, Race, and Women" offers an exploration of the entanglements of racial and gender identity in the complex process of vindicating social authority in early modern England. That the connections between race and gender are solidly historical rather than purely metaphorical becomes vividly apparent in the fact that in 1619, approximately sixteen years after the first production of *Othello*, the first Africans and the first white women landed in Virginia, where a white woman could be bought for 120 pounds of tobacco. In 1662, in a reversal of English common law, white men who fathered children on black women were excused of any legal or moral responsibility for them. Race, MacDonald insists, is constituted by a complex interaction of social, familial, and economic interests. Because the languages of racial identity are heavily dependent on gender and sexuality, when Cassio calls the onomastically white Bianca a "monkey" he links her with those black women in the period who were believed to copulate with apes. When Lucrece stabs herself, she bleeds corrupted black blood as well as red, as emblems of both her violation and her virtue. Lucrece is the "white hind" to Tarquin's "rough beast" so that "his crime takes on some of that aura of cross-species impropriety Brabantio sees in his daughter's union with Othello." Less ideologically adept than either of these texts, *Titus Andronicus* demonstrates that the race and gender